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ABSTRACT

This report compares the educational experiences of young children and their teachers in England, Sweden, and Spain. Data on which the report is based was derived from two studies of educational quality and teacher training throughout Europe. For each of the three countries reported, a description is presented of early childhood curriculum, learning environments, teacher characteristics, and teacher education. The report also discusses key Europe-wide trends and issues in early childhood education in Europe, reporting a rapid Europe-wide expansion of educational provision for children beginning at birth, a Europe-wide reconsideration of curriculum and teaching methodology to ensure that it is developmentally appropriate, and a Europe wide movement both to expand opportunities for professional training of preprimary teachers, and to decentralize the curriculum of schools and training institutions. (MM)

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THE EDUCATION OF YOUNG CHILDREN AND THEIR TEACHERS IN EUROPE

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The professional training of those who work with young children raises a number of questions which are receiving great attention across Europe.

Is professional training needed at all?

At what level should this training be?

Should it focus on education or care?

Should it be a practical or an academic training?

Whose responsibility should it be?

and, ultimately,

What is it going to cost?

How much can we afford?

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Comparison between countries exposes large variations in the extent, status, content and quality of this training which is further compounded by the diverse nature of early childhood settings in which young children throughout Europe are educated. (Pascal, Bertram and Heaslip 1991) The factors influencing national early childhood policies are many and complex, reflecting individual historical traditions, widely differing cultural attitudes and a variety of political and economic realities. In some countries there is no explicit national policy, whilst others have an extensive national commitment to early childhood education and care. Despite this diversity, one can identify throughout Europe, an increasing and shared concern to develop the quality of training for the early years. Research evidence which has shown, firstly, the link between training and the quality of early educational experience (Whitebook, Howes and Phillips 1989), and , secondly, the long-term effects of high quality early educational experiences on subsequent

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development, (Schweinhart, Weikart and Larner 1980), have added weight to the importance of training issues.

We believe there is an urgent need for current proposals for teacher education in England (and it is increasingly important to distinguish differing national policies within the UK), to be set in the wider context of developments throughout Europe.

The stated intentions for teacher education in England are:

1 A move to school-based training.

2 A shift of resources from training institutions to selected schools.

3 A diminution of the academic and theoretical content of training.

4 An increase in the practical content of training.

Any reflection upon such initiatives should incorporate a Eurocentric perspective. This would seem particularly appropriate given the stated commitment for the UK to play an active and enthusiastic role within the European Community, and the positive response to the breaking down of barriers between the East and West.

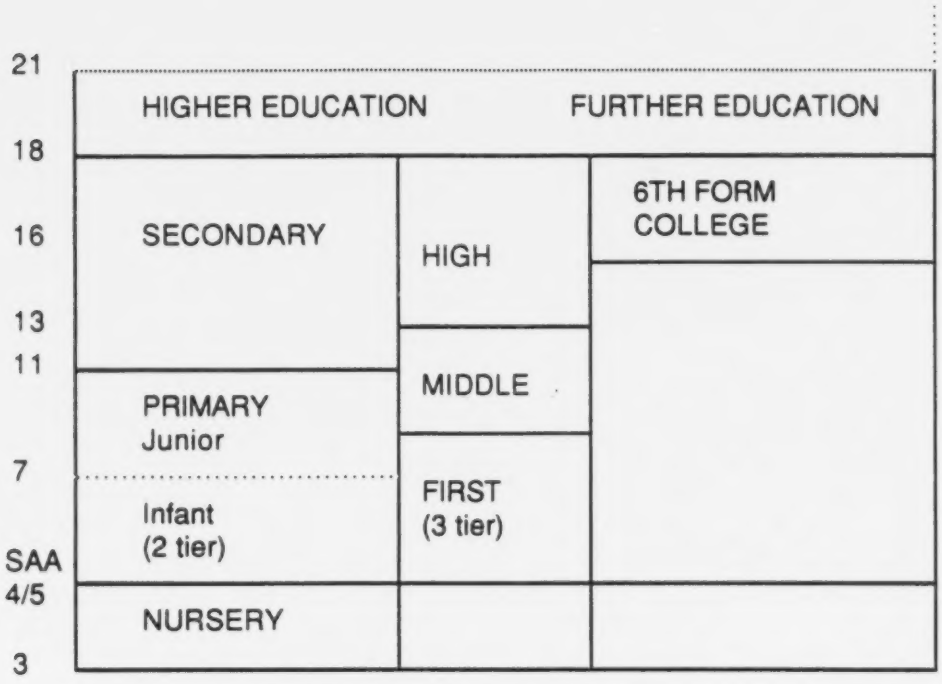
As we learn more about early childhood education in other European countries, it becomes clear that many similar issues are being faced. Sometimes these issues are being tackled in ways which closely match the approach adopted in the UK, but increasingly often, it seems that many of our European neighbours are adopting strategies which are very different. This is nowhere more true than in teacher education for the early years and one has to ask urgently - Why?

There is, at present, very little comparative research evidence which looks at, either the quality of educational provision across a range of settings within Europe, or at the quality of training for those involved in teaching in these settings. This is despite the European comparisons which are often drawn by politicians to justify their desired policy changes. However, two comparative research projects which the authors are currently involved in are beginning to map out precisely this territory. The first project is looking at how educational quality is defined and evaluated for young children within the UK and across Europe (Pascal and Bertram 1991). The second project is looking at the extent and nature of training for early years teachers throughout Europe (Pascal, Bertram and Heaslip 1991). The data coming out of these two projects provide a rich and fascinating insight into the quality of educational provision for young children across Europe. It also provides hard evidence by which some of the current speculation and inference of the media and politicians might be answered. Although the research has explored provision and training in eleven countries to date, for the purposes of this paper, a comparison will be drawn between the educational experiences of young children and their teachers in just three of these - England, Sweden and Spain. Following this, some key European-wide trends will be identified and some common issues

facing those concerned with training and supporting early years teachers will be highlighted.

Children and Their Teachers in England

FIGURE 1



SAA = Statutory Age of Admission

SOURCE. Directory of ATEE Early Years Working Group (1991)

Nowhere else in Europe is there the plethora of educational settings in which the young English child may be found. Statutory educational provision begins in the term following the childs' fifth birthday but in practice many children are in the primary system before this time. There is no national publicly funded system of care and education prior to this, other than for a minority of children. Policy continues to be based on the belief that this is the parents' responsibility and that diversity and choice should be encouraged. We therefore find English children from birth in an enormous range of settings, ranging from full-time private day care centres, voluntary creches, workplace nurseries, childminders, playgroups and independent nursery schools, through to publicly funded day nurseries, local authority nursery schools and reception classes in primary schools. Little is known about the quality of such provision which can range from excellent to very poor. Quality control is difficult, although the Children Act of 1989 has established a baseline to facilitate this.

The educational content of such provision also varies enormously. The Rumbold Report (DES 1990) encouraged workers in all settings to view themselves as

'educators' and to consider the educational aspect of their role carefully but there is no evidence to show how seriously, and to what extent, they have done so. Staffing ratios can vary from 1:2 to 1:30 (or more), depending on the age of the child and the type of setting. From birth to three a child is likely to be learning in settings which emphasise care and development and which are staffed by workers with qualifications that reflect this emphasis. There is a small, but growing belief that it is advantageous to have professionally trained teachers in these settings, but teacher training courses haven't yet incorporated the under-threes' in their age phasing.

The English nursery school curriculum has enjoyed a high reputation throughout the world and continues to be acknowledged as providing the best quality education for 3 and 4 year olds (House of Commons 1989, HMI 1989) . However, this is only available to less than 20% of children who are in local education authority nurseries. It is also under increasing threat as pressures from the National Curriculum impinge down and calls are made to reassess the curriculum for three to five year olds (Sylva, Siraj Blatchford and Johnson 1992). In practice these young children can experience a curriculum which varies from a highly formal, skills based regime, to one which is centred around the child and encourages independence, autonomy and all round development. However, the majority of four year olds are now found in infant and primary schools, where good practice may be found, but much concern has been voiced about the inappropriateness of the curriculum and the inadequacy of resourcing in many of these settings (Bennett and Kell 1989, DES 1989, Pascal 1990). The evidence seems to show that once the child enters the primary school system, National Curriculum requirements determine their educational experience and the child begins the journey on our very structured and centrally defined curriculum with its emphasis on cognitive development and subject knowledge.

What about the teachers of these young children?

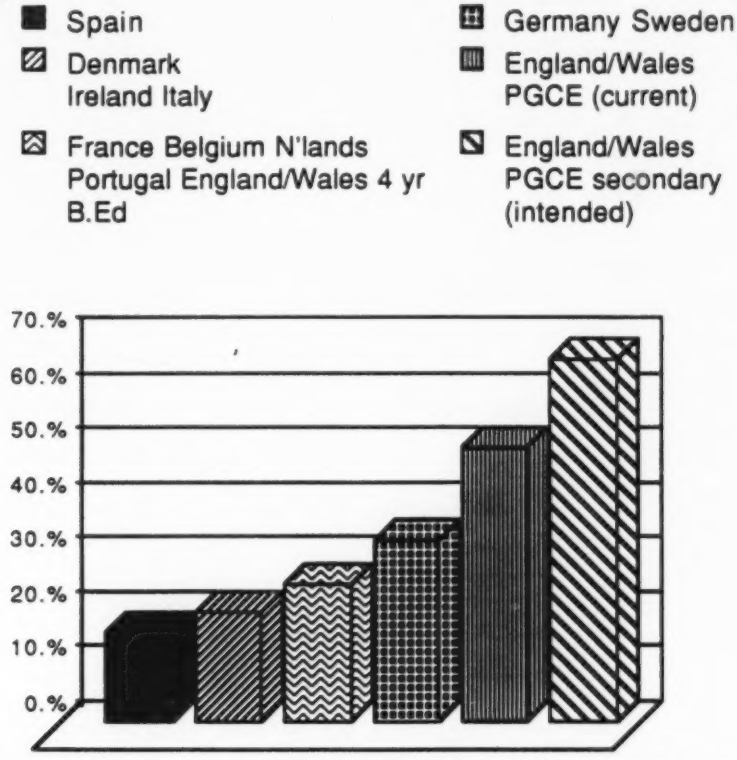
Professionally trained early years' teachers are rarely found in settings which provide for under-threes, and there is no requirement that this should be so. There is a wide range of training available for those who work in these settings provided by a multiplicity of bodies eg Pre-school Playgroup Association, National Association of Child Minders, Nursery Nurse Training Board, City and Guilds. There is a move to consolidate these under the NCVQ scheme but much work remains to be done here (Hevey 1986). Those who work in local education authority nurseries and primary schools do have to be professionally trained and the quality of training is as good, if not better, than that found elsewhere in Europe. We are privileged in England to have an all graduate profession with courses for early years' teachers being the same length, at the same academic level and providing the same status and pay as all other teachers. This is not the case elsewhere in Europe.

Teacher education in England consists of a post-18 course for which there are stringent entrance requirements. Students may do a 4 year B.Ed/BA (QTS) or a one year PGCE following a 3 year degree, and they generally opt for an age phase on entrance to a primary course. A small number of teachers are currently being

trained by the licensed teacher and articled teacher routes. Though favoured by Government policy, there are questions being raised about the effectiveness, efficiency and validity of these alternative routes. For instance, Scotland has not incorporated these schemes of training. New routes into teaching are appearing rapidly although we already have far more routes into teaching than anywhere else in Europe, where one route is the norm.

The content of teacher education courses is rigidly and centrally defined. There is an emphasis on National Curriculum subject knowledge, and professional training is done increasingly in schools with less and less time available for professional issues in the training institutions' programmes. There continues to be a debate about the applicability of subject specialisms to early years' teachers, as the time taken up on this leaves little room for such fundamental issues as child development, the management of adults and the child and the family. Some would argue that early years should be recognised as a subject specialism in itself, while others, quite rightly, point to the danger that teachers with such specialisms might be viewed as lower status than other teachers. However, it remains true that nowhere else in Europe do we find such an emphasis on curriculum subjects in training courses for nursery and primary teachers. A further issue where we are increasingly out of step is that of the proportion of school-based training in our courses. At present we have at least as much as the majority of other countries, and substantially more if you look at the PGCE route. (see figure 2)

FIGURE 2



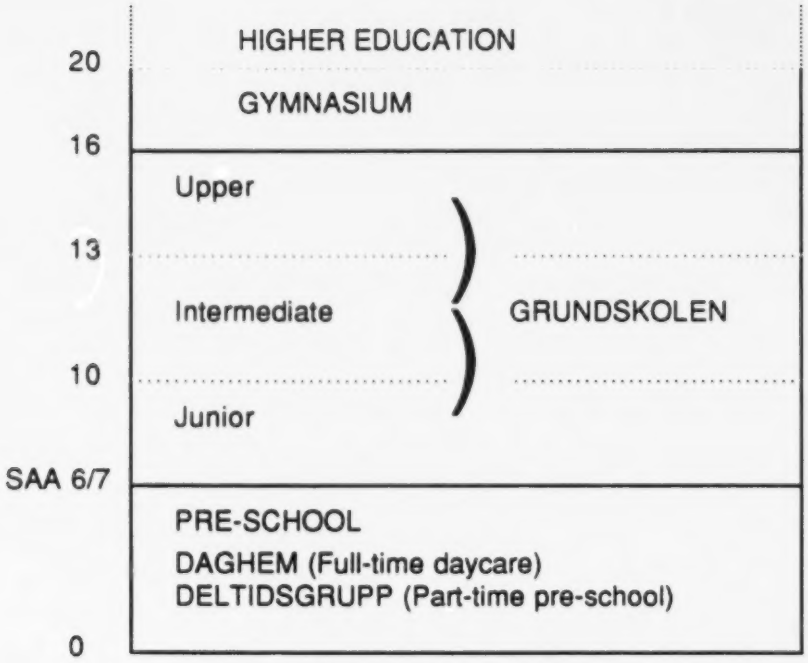
School experience as a % of the total course in initial training for early years' teachers in Europe

The proposed 66%, which is also likely to apply to primary courses, increases this difference considerably. It seems that elsewhere the academic but professionally focused courses is viewed as a central part of a teachers' training and critical to enhancing the status, theoretical understanding and expertise of the teaching profession. This view does not appear to prevail in current policy decisions in England.

In short, it would seem that the current quality and content of our early years' teacher training stands out as being amongst the best in Europe. Colleagues in other European countries express surprise that we in England are embarked upon such radical changes to the existing structure, when they are working hard to emulate what we are about to dismantle.

Children and Their Teachers in Sweden

FIGURE 3



SAA = Statutory Age of Admission

The Structure of the Education System in Sweden

In Sweden we found a very clear government commitment to providing high quality education and care from birth. Statutory educational provision begins at seven years of age, although there is now to be the option for children to enter the Compulsory Comprehensive School (Grundskolen) from the age of six. Interestingly, last year most parents chose not to take up this option, preferring to leave their child in pre-school provision. This can probably be explained by the fact that high quality state funded pre-school provision is available to all children

from twelve months of age and prior to this parents get statutory leave from work. However, there is also a widespread belief that the pre-school curriculum is more developmentally appropriate.

There are two kinds of pre-school provision; the more popular 'daghem', which provides full-time day-care, and the 'deltidsgrupp', which provides part-time nursery school provision. Both are staffed by trained teachers and nursery nurses, and parents are charged on a sliding scale according to income. The emphasis in these pre-school settings is very much on overall child development and care, with physical, social and emotional development through play, (and particularly, outdoor play), featuring strongly. Providers, and parents, express a strong belief that there should not be an over-concentration on cognitive development before the age of seven.

Once in 'Grundskolen', a more formal subject-based curriculum predominates, but we did find schools operating a negotiated curriculum throughout this age phase and a philosophy which fosters independence and autonomy in childrens' learning. There is a National Curriculum but this is a very slim book of broad guidelines and schools are encouraged to interpret this individually and to tailor it to their own particular needs.

Staffing ratio's throughout Swedish schools are high. For example, a group of 15 - 18 four to seven year olds would be staffed by 2 pre-school teachers and one nursery nurse. We also found specialised peripatetic teachers coming in to support class teachers. In one example we observed a dance lesson for a class of seven year olds which was led by a trained peripatetic dance teacher accompanied by a pianist. The class teacher was able to observe the lesson and carefully made notes on individual childrens' co-ordination and physical development. She explained to us how much this helped her in diagnosing children with reading and writing difficulties and allowed her to give them appropriate individual support once back in the classroom. Time was also available for her to talk to the dance teacher about the lesson once it was over as the classroom assistant helped the children to dress.

In Sweden there are also professionally trained Recreation and Leisure teachers, who provide out of school hours care for children whose parents wish it. These are increasingly operating within the same school building and participating as members of the whole school staff.

However, it should also be added at this point, that the cost of this excellent quality early years provision is high and the level of national funding it requires is increasingly being questioned by Sweden's new Conservative Government. We found the media and politicians arguing that there should be more choice and diversity offered in pre-school provision and more responsibility given to parents who can afford it.

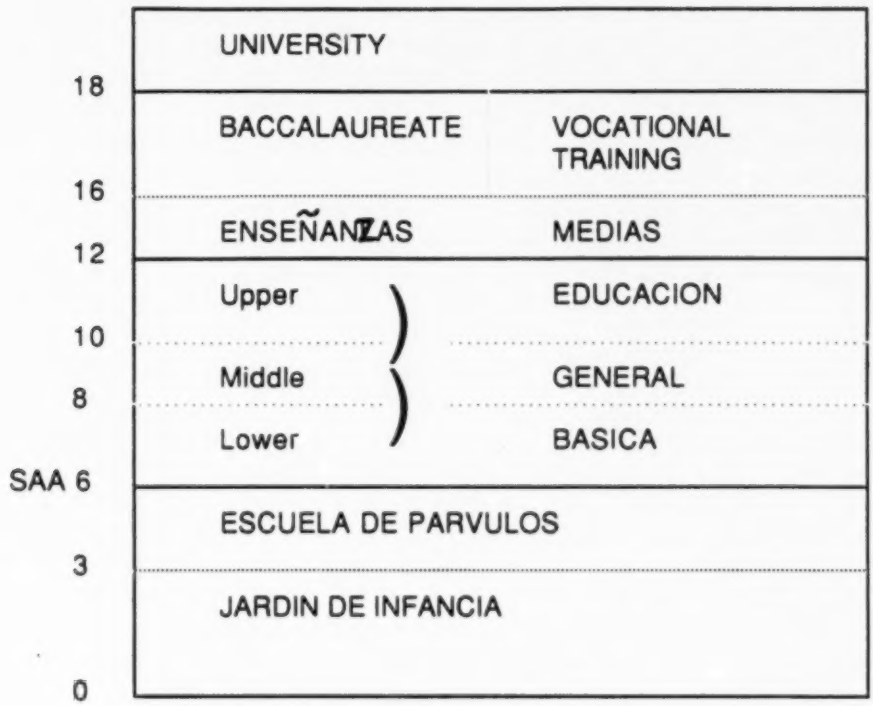
What about the teachers of these young children?

All the teachers who work in these early years settings receive a professional

training post-18. Entrance requirements to the courses are quite stringent and all must speak English. They also allow those with nursery nurse training and experience to qualify through an accelerated route. At present, courses for pre-school and recreation teachers are at a lower level, shorter and less academic than courses for comprehensive (Grundskolen) teachers, but these courses are in the process of being upgraded to be an equivalent level and length.

The courses for pre-school teachers cover a 1-6 age phase and so children from the earliest age have an appropriately trained teacher working with them. The content of the courses reflects the Swedes' emphasis on child development and their focus on aesthetic expression and environmental appreciation. Students spend about 33% of their course on teaching practice and this compares very favourably with the rest of Europe. (see figure 2) Recent developments in Swedish teacher education are interesting, especially when viewed in comparison with English developments. For example, there is a move to decentralise control of teacher education courses to the higher education institutions and for the detailed and very closely regulated course syllabus to be replaced by more general study plans in which only the overall purpose of the programme is described, along with a rough description of programme content and general recommendations on its structure. It is now to be up to each individual training institution to appoint a Study Programme Committee (Linjenamnd) with representatives from teachers, students and the labour market to carry out detailed planning of the content and structure of their courses. Recent guidelines indicate that teacher training is to become more academic in character, and there is a move to upgrade entrance requirements and inject more of a theoretical base into courses. They are also encouraging and financially supporting students to complete a proportion of their training in another European country as it is felt important to 'internationalise' and to ensure the students bring a European perspective to their work with children in school. In short, the Swedish system reveals a strong national commitment to high quality early years education and care, and acknowledges the importance of high quality training at initial and in-service level to this quality.

FIGURE 4



SAA = Statutory Age of Admission

The Structure of the Education System in Spain

In 1990, Spain introduced a radical reform of the organisation of their education system, under the LOGSE (General Organisation of the Education System) Act. Under this Act, the education system is to be divided into a series of 'cycles', which begin from birth, so that ALL children are now included in the education system. The first cycle stretches from birth to six years of age and remains optional. It is divided into two phases - 0-3 years, and 3-6 years. Compulsory education begins at six and ends at sixteen, and provides a general basic education (Educacion General Basico - EGB) The Act also requires that children in the first cycle must be taught by qualified infant teachers who work alongside Specialist Technicians for the kindergarten. Previously, teachers were only required for children from four years of age. Children from six to twelve years are taught by qualified primary teachers, as in the old system.

Until recently, the level of pre-school provision in Spain remained low. The number of places had actual decreased in the 60's and early 70's as high birthrates required resources which might otherwise have been directed at pre-school provision to be directed towards expanding compulsory schooling. During this period there was an enormous development in the private sector (Olmstead and Weikart 1989). Since 1970 there has been an increase in the state-owned

sector and in the 90's most children between the ages of four and six are catered for, but most families have to pay a contribution towards this. At present under fours are catered for largely in private daycare centres but it has been observed that prior to the 1990 Act, "settling up a daycare centre in Spain is easier than setting up a butcher shop or bar in terms of licensing and regulation requirements" (Palacios 1989 p30). However, under the new Act qualified teachers must be provided for under fours and this reflects the belief that provision for children from birth must be viewed as the first link in the educational chain and not just as 'care' centres. The Government has stated its intention to expand state provision for children from three to six years until all children are in assured places, with trained teachers required to work alongside other trained infant specialists throughout this first cycle. It has not achieved this yet but the agenda and targets have been set.

The curriculum in these pre-primary schools reflects great diversity because Spain's official guidelines for this age phase are fairly general Some teachers are innovative and have developed curricula which emphasise activities and experimentation. Others who are often less well trained, rely heavily on textbooks which have an emphasis on paper and pencil activities and passive learning. Generally, the younger the child, the greater the flexibility of the timetable and the less academic the curriculum. (Palacios 1989) However, new proposals and initiatives are encouraging active learning and parental participation throughout the pre-primary phase. Staffing levels are recommended at one adult to eight children in the first phase and two adults to twenty-five children in the second phase.

What about the teachers of these young children?

At present, many pre-primary centres are staffed by untrained teachers. There have been some special projects to train working pre-school teachers without adequate qualifications but as yet they have not reached many. The Ministry of Education and Science is attempting to emphasise the educational character of the first cycle and to lay down regulations regarding the teaching qualifications of those who work in such settings, but much remains to be done. However, there have been clear developments already with regard to the initial training of teachers.

The old Pre-school (2-5) and General Basic Education (6-12) Teaching Qualification have been replaced with an Infant (0-6) and Primary (6-12) Teaching qualification. All teacher education courses from 0-12 will now be at the same level and provide the same status and salary. Trainers have also had to reorientate the content of their courses to focus on children from birth. They have also been required to replace traditional didactic models of teaching methodology with an emphasis on transmitting and receiving knowledge, which it is consider to have proved inadequate, with more interactive and child-centred methods. The aim is to generate teachers who are able to reflect about their teaching methods and who are concerned about the significance of the curriculum content constructed by the child.

In Spain, as in most other countries, there is only one route into early years teaching and this is now a post-18, three year, university-based course. The

courses for Infant and Primary teachers are at Intermediate University Degree level and carry the status of Diplomate. Under the new Act, this remains at a lower level to that of Secondary teachers, whose training is at Upper University Degree level and carries the status of Licenciados or Graduate. The new courses embody a blend of subject knowledge and professional issues, and are increasingly academic in nature. Interestingly, Spain is one of the few European countries in which teachers are trained as subject specialists, but these subjects are grouped together eg humanities, sciences and pre-school is offered as a subject specialism. Also, uncommonly, students do not have a teaching practice at all until their final year of training, when they spend four months in school. This makes up only 16% of their total course and means that Spanish students spend the least time in Europe experiencing school-based training. (see figure 2)

In short, the Spanish system has made enormous strides during the 90's in upgrading and enhancing the quality of it's educational provision and training for the young child. It still has a long way to go but Spain does offer some interesting and original features which we may find useful to reflect upon and monitor further.

Current Trends and Key Issues

Two key questions emerge from a comparison of early years provision and training across Europe.

1 What constitutes high quality educational provision for young children?

2 What kind of training and support do early years' teachers need?

These two questions are not unconnected. There is clear evidence that the competence and quality of the teacher is a central determinant of the quality and effectiveness of the early years programme. (Whitebook, Howes and Phillips 1989) If we wish to enhance the quality of education for our youngest children, we must address issues concerning the quality of our training for their teachers. Countries throughout Europe are recognising this fact and moving to enhance and upgrade their early years teacher education courses. As we look across Europe a number of common trends can be identified which point to a growing consensus about the key issues for those involved in training and support as we move rapidly towards the 21st century.

We can see:

* A European-wide focus on the importance of pre-primary education and a rapid expansion of educational provision from birth.

* A European-wide reconsideration of curriculum and teaching methodology to ensure that it is developmentally appropriate. In many countries this is causing a move away from formal, didactic modes of instruction towards more child-centred, experiential, and active modes of learning, and a loosening up of centrally determined curriculum content. In other countries the opposite movement is taking place.

- A European-wide movement to upgrade and expand opportunities for the professional training of pre-primary teachers. In the majority of countries courses are becoming longer, more academically focussed and based largely in institutions of higher education, working in partnership with schools. (See Figure 2) The need for a sound theoretical underpinning to professional practice is seen as an essential element of training.

- A European-wide movement to decentralise the curriculum of both schools and training institutions to allow room for innovation, individualisation and flexibility so that local needs and circumstances can be met more effectively.

One of the key features we found in every country we explored was the younger the child being taught, the lower the status, the lower the training and the lower the salary of their teacher. Yet we have also found in every country a commitment to change this situation and a growing belief that our youngest children need teachers who are professionally qualified, highly skilled and articulate practitioners who enjoy a position of high status and equitable remuneration in terms of pay and conditions of work. Throughout Europe, countries are working their way steadily towards the realisation of this goal, and many view England with envy in this respect. In the spirit of European collaboration, but also competition, it is imperative that we do not lose what has always been viewed as our strength - the high quality of our early years, and particularly nursery, education, and the training and support which has nourished this quality. There are a number of developments in current education policy which make us deeply fearful for the future of the young English child and their teacher in Europe. Perhaps these views from abroad might provide us with a clearer view of the direction in which we should be going.

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